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ABSTRACT

A rhetorical analysis of the letter of application and the vita used in applying for a teaching job in language and literature is used to provide practical advice to applicants. Of the many components of a full rhetorical analysis, three receive special attention: the rhetorical situation, some characteristics of the audience, and several features of the "message." Ways in which either the letter of application or the vita can malfunction are given special attention. (AA)

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THE RHETORIC OF THE LETTER OF APPLICATION AND VITA: A CHAIRMAN'S VIEW

The task of applying for a teaching job in language and literature is today, as everyone here knows, usually a frustrating and a baffling one. Letters of application may evoke no response whatsoever or only an uninformative letter of rejection. Yet the task is not an impossible one for a number of jobs are available, and most applicants seem to believe that once their dossiers are examined their obvious merits will impress even the most obtuse of department chairmen. More than half of those who apply never get past the initial screening, however, because their letters of application and their vitas fail to evoke the hoped for response. Most of my remarks focus on this first stage of the application process.

Some applicants obviously apply for jobs for which they are clearly unqualified; they can expect no more than cursory letter of rejection. But others fail because they do not understand fully the rhetorical problem they confront and hence cannot identify the best means of achieving their purposes. I have identified the problem as a significant rhetorical one, and would like to illustrate some ways in which a rhetorical analysis, may be useful. Of the many components to be examined in a full rhetorical analysis, time requires that I limit myself to three: the rhetorical situation, some characteristics of the audience, and several critical features of the "message."

Two features of the rhetorical situation are so obvious as to demand only a brief mention. First the number of applicants for academic jobs exceeds the number of available jobs by at least three

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to one, and probably as high as ten to one for tenure-track positions. Second, competition for these jobs is very fierce. Graduate schools have still not reduced substantially the number of new Ph.D's entering the job market, and to their numbers we must add some new M.A., M.A.T., and D.A. graduates competing for the same positions. Complicating the problem are those competent and even sometimes brilliant teachers and scholars who have lost positions in which they would have been securely tenured five or six years ago, victims of such things as tenure quotas, arbitrary loading formulas, cut-backs in response to losses in enrollment, and the curtailment or elimination of programs. Many of these people offer a range of teaching and professional experience that recent graduates cannot match, and they often compete for jobs at lower ranks and salaries than they merit.

Although the third feature of the rhetorical situation is again predictable, it does at least give the prospective applicant an opportunity to exercise judgment and common sense. The number of applicants for each advertised opening is likely to be great, but the numbers of applicants will vary in a predictable pattern, as will those who survive the first screening. The looser the published job description the larger the number of applicants will be for a given position, especially if the description calls for a "generalist" or for one of the more common specialties in literary study (e.g., 19th-century British or American literature, the novel, modern poetry). In responding to such advertisements you must expect delays and perhaps bewilderment. Next, we can predict that prestigious institutions will receive far more applications than those with meager reputations, but they will also screen out more applicants quickly, and perhaps without very careful scrutiny, simply on the basis of the institution in which an applicant has done his graduate work. The effects of geographical location on the number of applicants are more unpredictable,

yet in spite of changing life styles in the U.S. most people seeking jobs as college teachers continue to prefer urban settings to those in remote areas. Furthermore, a recent study conducted by the Association of State Colleges and Universities showed that students are increasingly attending colleges in cities with populations over 100,000, and that schools in small cities or remote areas are likely to decline in enrollment.

The effects of Affirmative Action programs on procedures and numbers of applicants are not as predictable as they are intended to be, but a few observations are in order. Many such programs require that applications be accepted only in response to advertised openings, making unsolicited applications a waste of time, money, and emotional energy. Many more also require that applications be received within a specified deadline, restricting further the usefulness of unsolicited applications. But of more interest are their effects upon the pools of job applicants. A smaller proportion of women and members of minorities apply to small regional institutions or to those of low prestige than to the large and prestigious institutions. The best qualified of the women and minority applicants tend to seek out the prestigious institutions and those capable of offering most potential for professional advancement. Even schools like my own, on the other hand, receive applications from very highly qualified male applicants, including those who would have expected to teach in a prestige university a decade ago. The implications for job seekers are quite apparent.

One final feature of the rhetorical situation deserves attention, for it affects the way in which job applicants and members of the profession alike must see themselves. The discipline of English studies simply is not shaped as it was a decade ago when many of those now entering the job market began their studies. The emphasis is less exclusively

literary than it was, and the period and genre course are not as consistently the standard offering of departments of language and literature. Departments have once again assumed their responsibility for teacher education and for uses of the language in many forms of discourse. Members of English faculties have to be able to handle courses in technical and business writing, English as a second language, folklore, reading skills, introductions to the humanities, and interdisciplinary studies. Linguistics and rhetoric are no longer dismissed as peripheral to the discipline, or as subordinate in stature to criticism and literary scholarship. Because the scope of the discipline has enlarged and its edges have become shaggy while the size of English faculties have remained the same or have shrunk, faculty members need to have a larger range of skills than they did when the Romantic specialist taught nothing but courses and seminars in Romantic literature. This has a profound effect upon the skills departments seek and how job applicants must present themselves.

The audience for the letter of application and vita need not detain us as long as our analysis of rhetorical situation. In most departments the first screening of job applicants is carried out by the chairman, and I shall use this reification as our "audience." Contrary to prevailing legends among faculty members and job seekers, chairmen are not insensitive manipulators of people, single-mindedly devoted to self-aggrandizement and the accumulation of political power; neither do they prefer the moving of paper to the labors of classroom work or the library. But they do have to carry out a variety of administrative tasks, some of which do shape institutional policy, and many of which represent a waste of time, talent, and energy. A typical chairman's day is characterized by a series of interruptions, annoyances, silly questions, formal and informal meetings, and the assertive jangle of the telephone; interspersed among such frustrations are occasional intervals of productive work.

This hyperbolic characterization of a chairman's day is not intended to evoke compassion, but just to remind you of what you must face in submitting a job application. Your application will be one of many, perhaps as many as 800, and it must be dealt with according to whatever procedures have been established in a particular school. The sheer volume will contribute to a chairman's impatience no matter how sympathetic he may feel toward those making applications, and no matter how sad he may be about evidence of malaise in his profession.

Since the establishment of Affirmative Action programs record keeping has increased enormously. I must, for example, log in each application submitted in response to a job advertisement, recording such things as date, sex or race of applicant, degrees, the extent to which an applicant satisfies each of the minimal advertised criteria for the job, and disposition on first screening. Each application requires a minimum of eight minutes work before coding the letter and turning it over to the secretary for the typing of a response. About one application out of six will call for the dictation of a special letter. Having large numbers of applications ensures that the procedure will be fatiguing and slow. It will create an almost involuntary urge to cut through stacks of letters as quickly as possible, to seek out in every letter of application and vita some legitimate reason for eliminating the applicant. This may seem to you proof that chairmen are indeed insensitive and that your talents are being unjustly ignored, but there can be no quarreling with the need to identify those applicants worthy of serious consideration. No chairman can ask the members of his screening committee to read hundreds of dossiers. Hence the need for letters of application and vitas to be precise, economical, and graceful.

The rhetoric of the application letter and vita is critical if an applicant is to be given the chance of displaying all of his qualifications.

But their importance does not end once the dossier has been requested, for members of the screening committee will also gain their first acquaintance with an applicant through the letter and vita. They are the primary means for demonstrating how the applicant conceives of himself and of his qualifications for a particular position. They establish the rhetorical s[illegible]ce that will either be supported, qualified, or repudiated by the letters and data in the dossier. Allow me to offer to some specific suggestions.

The primary requirement as I see it is to answer the specific advertisement of an opening, enumerating in detail the particular ways in which you qualify for the position. This means that you probably will not be ab[illegible]e to get by with a single letter following the formula: "I should like to apply for a position in your department. . .," or even the formula "I should like to apply for the position you advertised in the JIL. . . ." It is obviously impractical to compose separate letters of application in response to each advertisement, but it is possible to compose letters that enable you to insert key words designating the fields being called for, and even to provide for the rearranging of sentences and paragraphs. This has a further advantage in that it forces the applicant to consider carefully whether or not he possesses the qualifications that are specified in the job advertisement. Taking the time to do so will result in the submission of fewer blanket applications, and, more importantly, in enabling the applicant to articulate just what he does have to offer. By doing so the applicant gains a distinct advantage, for he can tell the chairman exactly what he has done and is prepared to do rather than leaving up the the chairman the task of reading through the letter minutely to see whether or not he believes the applicant to satisfy the minimal qualifications. It is the same thing we ask our freshmen to do when we ask that they analyze their evidence rather than leaving up to the reader the task of drawing inferences and framing them into controlling generalizations.

The second requirement of the application letter is that it demonstrate your sense of style, your understanding of the relation between the purpose of a piece of discourse and its form, and your command of the conventions of the written language. I cannot even estimate how many times members of screening committees have written in their notes on job applicants that "they can't write"; this observation has a way of taking precedence over all other considerations when making final rankings. Begin by showing that you know enough about your own discipline to address the particular chairman by name, and even if the name in the Directory issue of PMLA is wrong you will have the advantage of showing that you know how to start a letter and how to use the services of professional organizations. Second, pay close attention to sentence structure, paragraph structure, and diction. Nothing puts off a reader more quickly than clumsy prose and buubling syntax. Some technical terms can be used when appropriate, but a display of jargon or cant will not dazzle a reader whose business is the analysis of the language. Paragraphing is particularly important because it reveals the way you analyze and categorize your interests and skills, and hence reveals the very qualities of mind that you will presumably be employed to exercise.

The letter of application can malfunction in a number of different ways. It may be too sketchy, or badly organized. It may betray signs of self-indulgence or a failure to understand the qualifications for the position that has been advertised. It may from lack of proofreading suggest carelessness, or from a lack of detail puzzle a reader about the writer's intentions. But the vita is perhaps even more liable to mislead or unintentionally misrepresent; its malfunctions, it seems to me, are generally more damaging than even those in the letter of application--a statement based not just on the experience of reading several thousand vitas but also on that gained in talking to people in the MLA Job Counseling Center for the past two years. I shall try to support this extravagant proposition.

The vita represents what a job applicant conceives of as the fullest possible yet economical summary of his accomplishments, training and education, professional and academic interests and experiences, and long-term aspirations and goals. The vita is prepared, traditionally and appropriately, in a single version and reproduced for circulation with job applications as well as with other public representations of oneself (as in information for news items, guides for a public introduction, or biographical notices). It will be revised only when something new is to be added, such as the completion of a terminal degree, the award of a new honor, the development of a new skill, the publication of a new article or short story, or the taking on of a significant new professional activity. It is an essentially conservative document, slow to change and representing what must be taken as a person's honest assessment of his dominant skills, interests, and qualifications. It is also selective insofar as it does not list every interest, experience, or professional association a candidate may have had, but the selection also represents the priority that the compiler of a vita assigns his various activities. This reveals also the way in which an applicant conceives of the profession he hopes to pursue, for his list of strengths may be presumed to summarize what he believes to be among significant activities carried on within it. The vita may, therefore, have the unfortunate effect of suggesting that an applicant may be suitable for no role whatsoever in the profession as it has evolved since the middle of the 1960's.

This assertion does not seem to me hyperbolic, for it reflects an illuminating experience I had a couple of years ago in the MLA Job Counseling Center, an experience that I have tested many times since. A man in his mid thirties with a Ph.D. from a prestigious Eastern university sat down to talk to me after having received not only no interviews but virtually no responses to his letters of application. He had an impressive range of

professional activities in both colleges and secondary schools; he had published, and he had some administrative experience. There was nothing in his letter of application to suggest that he had two left heads or that he believed psychedelic experiences in the classroom the best way of teaching freshman composition. But neither was there anything to suggest his range of interests, skills, and experiences. He was a specialist in Victorian literature, ambitious to teach advanced-level courses in the Victorian novel. He listed as a secondary interest Victorian prose and literary criticism. There was nothing to suggest that he had ever taught composition or that he was interested in doing so. There was nothing to suggest that he had experience in English Education, that he had chaired highschool English programs, and that he had supervised practice teachers in the secondary schools. His vita might have been appropriate for a job application in 1963, but certainly not in the mid 1970's. It never seems to have occurred to him that he would be hired on anything but the basis of his primary academic preparation. I do not want to suggest that the field of specialization is unimportant, but I do want to emphasize that few people are hired, except in senior full professorships, on the basis of primary field alone.

This example implies that those sections of the vita requiring most attention are the ones devoted to the applicant's academic specialties, to his teaching experiences, and to his professional and scholarly interests and experiences. These reveal what an applicant has been trained and educated to do, what he has done, and what he anticipates doing during the first years of his professional career. These sections provide both a retrospective and prospective profile of a job applicant as he conceives of himself; it is obviously subject to change but it does represent a conscious and half-conscious professional portrait at the time of application. Such sections are therefore too valuable to treat casually or to prepare

carelessly.

I see three principles as essential in preparing these sections of the vita, principles that are also applicable in writing letters of application. They are: completeness, order, and correspondence. Allow me to explain these concepts in more detail.

By completeness I mean a full representation of the skills, knowledge, and experience that one can legitimately claim for onesself. There is obviously no justification in listing every subject in which an applicant has taken course work. On the other hand, when an applicant has taken a number of courses on a subject, or on closely related subjects, he may be justified in claiming more authority than is expected of doctoral students preparing for comprehensive examinations. The same may be said for professional activities gained during a graduate student's apprenticeship. Some are invited, for example, to serve on executive committees for composition programs. Such an experience, especially if buttressed by suitable course work in language studies, rhetoric, etc. may well provide a conceptual grasp of the process of composing and of the theory of written discourse that goes far beyond that of the student whose experience was limited to teaching composition part-time as a graduate assistant. To identify what should be listed in the vita requires a careful review of what one has studied and done. This list should be full, but it should not be outrageous (like on I saw a year ago in the vita of a linguistics student, in his mid twenties, who claimed a mastery of no fewer than thirty-five languages, many of them very esoteric). A typical list for someone comparatively new to teaching may include four or five competences , and perhaps several more interests. I suggest that the following is both typical and credible: 19th-century British literature, Colonial American literature, composition, the history of the novel, and the history of ideas,

The next principle, that of order, has its roots more in the conventions of our profession than in rhetoric. A rhetorician will usually look to beginning and end positions as indicators of intended emphasis. But in vitas we traditionally assume that the order proceeds the greatest to the least competence or interest. Thus is the list above composition must be seen as subordinate to both 19th-century British Literature and to Colonial American literature, but as a field of greater competence than the history of the novel and intellectual history. The order can be as significant as the inclusions in revealing the way in which an applicant conceives of himself, and it is apt to be closely attended to by those screening applications. It is important that the order also represent a realistic and credible profile of skills and interests. During the past couple of years, for example, an increasing number of applicants have been moving composition from the end of their lists of skills and interests to somewhere near the beginning. Now if I were convinced that this represented a new set of priorities in the discipline I would be delighted, for I would see it as evidence of our emerging from the narrow conception of English studies that has earned us, whether deservedly or not, the reputation of being irresponsible snobs and elitists. But I am not convinced, or at least very often, because so many vitas fail to observe the last of my three principles, that of correspondence.

Correspondence is a skeptic's principle, a test to see whether or not the parts fit together; it is a measure of the credibility and feasibility of what is claimed in the vita, and also in the letter of application. We all apply the principle in assuming that the field of a student's dissertation is also his major field of specialization; there is no outrage in the claim of an applicant's being a nineteenth-century specialist who has written a dissertation on the political postures of the Edinburgh Review during Queen

Victoria's reign. On the contrary, what can we make of an applicant who lists composition as his secondary or tertiary interest but who has taken little or no course work in rhetoric, linguistics, semantics, etc., and whose experience is limited to a couple of years as a teaching assistant? The principle of correspondence demands that preparation, experience, and interest all mutually support one another. Chairmen and screening committees habitually check for the self-consistency of the letters and vitas they review, and applicants should be aware of this in making a case for themsleves.

Before leaving this principle I should like to stress one more important application of it. I remarked earlier that just one version of the vita is to be prepared, whereas an applicant may use several versions of the letter in responding to the particular criteria specified in various job advertisements. But even when using several versions of the application letter it is essential that each letter correspond with the vita. If a job description calls for experience in the teaching of basic American literature courses an applicant should explain in the letter of application that he has had such experience. But the vita must also list such a teaching experience if the claim is to be credited. If an applicant cannot honestly list such experience as a significant one on the permanent vita, he cannot claim to have it for the purpose of demonstrating his qualifications for a position.

A few points are probably worthy of summarizing. To qualify oneself for an academic job today it is essential to gain as wide a range of professional preparation and experience as possible. This should certainly include at least one strong second field, and preferably one as well in a related field of the humanities or in education. Be realistic in your expectations, both about the kind of school in which you may find a job and

about the kinds of courses you are apt to be teaching, including basic courses in composition, reading, and introductions to literature. In presenting yourself take care to outline fully and honestly what you have to offer, making sure that your claims all correspond with one another. Finally, be prepared to elaborate on any of your skills, experiences, or interests should you be called upon to do so. You should welcome, in fact, the opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of a skill or a responsibility. Yet always remember that you are writing for an audience accustomed to interpreting uses of the English language for tone, for the writer's stance, for logical consistency, and for emotive appeals. You can also be assured that you have an audience that shares your anguish about the predicament of the humanities in the U.S.